

my Democratic colleagues at a press conference last week on the rising cost of prescription drugs.

As a pharmacist, Dr. Hose works hard every day to make sure the customers he has have access to the medications they need to stay healthy and, in many cases, to stay alive.

However, that task keeps getting harder and harder. Between 2008 and 2016, prices on the most popular brand-name drugs rose 208 percent—208 percent during that timeframe. Dr. Hose's customers didn't see their incomes rise 208 percent during that same time. Certainly people in Michigan didn't see their incomes rise 208 percent during that same timeframe.

According to AARP, the average price of brand-name drugs that seniors often take rose at four times the rate of inflation in just 1 year—four times the rate of inflation in 17 years alone. That is unsustainable for people.

Dr. Hose's most vulnerable customers are seniors, of course, especially those who live on Social Security. As the price of medications keeps going up and up, Dr. Hose's customers find it harder and harder to pay for the medications they need.

Dr. Hose said this: "In no way is the current system looking out for the best interests of the patient, who ultimately needs to buy their medications to stay alive." Just ask anyone who takes insulin. Insulin is not a new drug. In fact, it has been around since 1922—almost 100 years—when Canadian scientists treated the first diabetic patient. Those scientists sold the patent to the University of Toronto for three Canadian dollars. They said they didn't believe they should make money off of something that was so important to people's lives. Imagine. They knew how important their discovery was and how many lives would be saved. But somewhere between 1922 and 2019, insulin has become less about saving lives and more about making money. In fact, over the past 15 years, insulin prices have tripled, putting people's health and lives at risk.

Last summer, I met Nicole Smith-Holt, who lives in Richfield, MN. She came to Washington, DC, to testify during a hearing on prescription drug prices. Her son, Alec, was diagnosed with type 1 diabetes when he was 24 years old. Alec worked hard to keep his diabetes under control, but one thing he couldn't control was the rising cost of his insulin.

When Alec turned 26, he was no longer qualified to be under his parents' insurance plan, as we have under the Affordable Care Act. About 20 days later, he went to the pharmacy to buy his monthly supply of insulin. The bill for his insulin and supplies came to \$1,300. It was a week from payday, and he didn't have \$1,300, so he started rationing his insulin. Alec never made it to payday.

Nicole said:

I received a call that no parent ever wants to receive or expects to receive. I was told

that my son was found dead in his apartment, on his bedroom floor all alone.

She added:

We lost an amazing young man. He had so many hopes and dreams. He left behind a 5-year-old daughter who now has to grow up without her father. His little brother lost his idol, his sisters lost a best friend, and my husband and myself lost our child.

Affordable medication is a life-and-death issue for millions of Americans like Alec. Unfortunately, we have a pharmaceutical industry that is more interested in profits right now than in people.

In 2018, there were 1,451 registered lobbyists for the pharmaceutical and health product industry. That is almost 15 lobbyists for every Senator. Their job is to stop competition and keep prices high, and they are doing a very good job. It is the ultimate example of a rigged system. It has to change.

The No. 1 way we can bring down costs is to let Medicare negotiate the best price. From the beginning, Medicare Part D has been prohibited from harnessing the bargaining power of 43 million American seniors to bring down costs, which is absurd. That didn't make sense back in 2003, when it was passed as part of Medicare Part D's protectionist language, and it doesn't make sense today.

We know how negotiation can work. We know how negotiation can work because it works for the VA, which saved 40 percent compared to Medicare. We have the VA system for veterans, and we have Medicare for seniors and people with disabilities. The VA negotiates. Medicare is stopped by law from negotiating best price—which, by the way, keeps us with the highest prices in the world. In fact, according to a recent AARP analysis, Medicare could have saved \$14.4 billion on just 50 drugs in 2016 if that program had paid the same prices as the VA—\$14.4 billion. By the way, cut that down, that is hundreds of dollars—thousands of dollars out of the pockets of seniors and people with disabilities and, more broadly, people across the country in every family.

A recent poll found that 92 percent of Americans support allowing Medicare to negotiate drug prices. I would love 92 percent agreement on anything. We should be able to act quickly on something that 92 percent of the American public thinks we ought to do. So what is stopping us? The pharmaceutical lobby and my Republican colleagues in Congress. It is time to listen to the 92 percent of Americans who want to allow Medicare to negotiate with drug companies. It is just plain common sense.

Negotiating a bulk price is not radical; it is actually something that is done in industry after industry after industry.

Dr. Hose said:

Seniors in Medicare Part D are one of the largest purchasers of medication in the world. Yet they are unable to leverage their buying power to decrease their costs.

It makes no sense. It makes no sense. It is past time that this should be changed. But we certainly, as we are talking about ways to lower prices right now—and I commend the chairman and ranking member of Finance for working on this issue and the chairman for bringing the top drug company CEOs and the pharmacy benefit managers into committee. I commend him for that. But this is the moment we need to be totally focused and totally serious about bringing down prices in the most effective way. If we want to do it right, we need to allow Medicare to negotiate on behalf of the American people and put people first.

Mr. President, I yield the floor.

I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Mr. LANKFORD). The clerk will call the roll.

The senior assistant bill clerk proceeded to call the roll.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Texas.

Mr. CORNYN. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the quorum call be rescinded.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

NATIONAL DEFENSE AUTHORIZATION ACT

Mr. CORNYN. Mr. President, today we will take the first step in the passage of the National Defense Authorization Act when we hold the cloture vote this afternoon. For the last 58 years, consecutively, Congress has passed this important legislation to fund our Nation's military and support the men and women who wear our uniform and defend our freedoms, both at home and around the world.

Last month the Senate Armed Services Committee voted overwhelmingly by a vote of 25 to 2 to advance this legislation to the Senate floor. So it goes without saying, perhaps, that this enjoys broad bipartisan support, but in this political environment, I will go ahead and say that anyway.

This bill received that kind of support because it includes the ideas and feedback from Members of both parties and places our national security where it should be, above all other considerations when it comes to the Federal Congress.

I wish I could say the same thing about the House version of the National Defense Authorization Act. After extensive debate and a largely party-line vote in the House, the House Armed Services Committee voted last week to ban the deployment of low-yield nuclear warheads on submarine-launched ballistic missiles, which is a dangerous step that could prevent us from being able to respond to attacks from our adversaries.

I realize the seriousness of this topic, and really the purpose of my speaking today is to raise the visibility of this issue so that Members can begin to understand and grapple with the subject matter and reach informed decisions, which I believe would be in favor of the Senate version, which would allow the deployment of low-yield nuclear weapons on submarines.

Significantly, I believe the House provisions, although well-intended, would make the potential for the use of these weapons more likely rather than less. To state the obvious, I hope that no nuclear weapon in our arsenal or in the arsenal of an adversary of ours will ever see the light of day. Nuclear weapons should always be a last resort.

If you think about it, it is really almost a miracle that 74 years ago at Hiroshima was the last time a nuclear weapon was used, and I hope that record continues unbroken indefinitely. Why has it been 74 years? Well, it is because the countries, by and large, that possess nuclear weapons realize the gravity of their use and that, once started, a nuclear war would result in devastation for everyone—everyone, literally—on the planet.

Yet we would be foolish to ignore the clear posture of our adversaries when it comes to nuclear weapons and play into their hands and, I think, actually make the use of these weapons more likely through miscalculation and mistake. Let's take Russia, for example. Back when General Dunford, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, testified at his confirmation hearing before the Armed Services Committee, he was asked his assessment of the threat that Russia poses to the United States. He said: My assessment today, Senator, is that Russia presents the greatest threat to our national security. If you want to talk about a nation that could pose an existential threat to the United States, I would have to point to Russia, and if you look at their behavior, it is nothing short of alarming.

That was in 2015, and I would say, in terms of the existential threat, nothing has changed in terms of Russia's bad behavior. They have continued their bad behavior to this day in Syria, Ukraine, and Crimea. Basically, if they feel they can make America's job tougher anywhere around the world, they try to do so.

Looking at Russia and its nuclear arsenal—their nuclear deterrent strategy is one of the world's worst-kept secrets. It is known by most as “escalate to deescalate.” The Russians are aware that the United States possesses far greater conventional military capabilities and developed a strategy that uses their lesser capabilities as an advantage. But Russia's nuclear doctrine allows them to attack conventional forces—say, NATO forces in Europe—with a nuclear weapon under the pretext that the United States would have no way to respond to that attack—in other words, use of a low-yield tactical nuclear weapon in Europe—and they would essentially dare the United States to respond, and the only option the United States has is a strategic weapon on top of an intercontinental ballistic missile. Well, you can see why a President would be reluctant to use that sort of devastating power to respond to the use of a tactical nuclear weapon in Europe—attacking one of our NATO partners. That is the dis-

parity I think all of our Members need to be aware of and need to think about.

The foundation of the Russian nuclear doctrine is this: They believe the United States would be hesitant to retaliate against a low-yield first strike by Russia with a high-yield weapon. Through their actions, those who are opposing the deployment of low-yield nuclear weapons in the Defense authorization bill are confirming the belief of the Russians that absent a low-yield tactical weapon that could be used in response without using strategic weapons and risking a nuclear holocaust—actually, it counterintuitively makes it more likely that the Russians would take that step through miscalculation.

Our friend and colleague Senator INHOFE, the Chairman of the Armed Services Committee, said on the floor last summer when we were having a debate on this topic that Russia “may perceive that limited nuclear first use, including low-yield weapons, would present the United States with two bad choices: escalate or do nothing.” He is exactly right.

We are dissuaded from using conventional forces out of fear that the conflict would quickly escalate into a catastrophic world war, but we cannot accept inaction as an appropriate response. In order to honor our NATO and global security commitments, our military needs to have the capacity to respond appropriately and proportionately to any attack, and to do that, we must develop our own low-yield nuclear weapons and bolster the deterrent value of the U.S. nuclear triad.

The point here is to make nuclear war—to take it off the table so that no one will even dare travel down that path. That is the way we will keep that 74-year record since Hiroshima unbroken into the indefinite future, hopefully permanently.

The importance of replacing high-yield warheads with low-yield ones was underscored in the 2018 Nuclear Posture Review. The administration called for the employment of low-yield nuclear warheads to remove Russia's perceived advantage, which former Secretary Defense James Mattis once called “bellicose and cavalier.” It specifically argues that expanding these options will “help ensure that potential adversaries perceive no possible advantage in limited nuclear escalation, making nuclear employment less likely.” That is the point; that is the objective—to make nuclear employment less likely.

This is what the strategy refers to as credible deterrence. By reducing the disparity between their potential strike and our potential response, the initial attack is less likely. This is of huge importance to our country and our national security, as well as that of our allies. NATO and non-NATO allies depend on the U.S. nuclear deterrent for their own security, and we must take every step possible to be prepared.

I note, parenthetically, that this is another reason why only rational ac-

tors should have nuclear weapons, because when Kim Jong Un in North Korea or when the ayatollahs in Tehran get ahold of nuclear weapons, they may or may not be subject to the same sort of deterrence that a Russia is when it comes to the use of possible employment of nuclear weapons.

I find it perplexing that some of our Democratic colleagues are trying to take this step, which would place us in a strategic disadvantage against Russia, when they have made a platform of confronting Russian aggression. As a matter of fact, I think we all, on a bipartisan basis, have supported opposing Russian aggression. So why is it that we are hesitant to do so on this topic?

When it comes to Russia's most blatant form of aggression—nuclear weapons—we can't afford to unilaterally disarm our military and leave the United States without a credible deterrent. We have already seen Russia's flagrant violations of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty, and it continues to modernize its nuclear weapons. The more it feels like it has gained some advantage over the United States, the more they may be tempted to actually use them.

Why should we allow that to continue without preparing for a possible response or, at minimum, reducing the likelihood they will ever be employed in the first place?

House Armed Services Chairman ADAM SMITH said: “We do not think it is the proper approach to start talking about a proportional response, because it plants in peoples' minds that there is somehow an acceptable nuclear war.”

That is just not true. No one accepts as inevitable a nuclear war. What we are trying to do is to reduce the potential that that might actually happen because of its devastating consequences to everyone on the planet, literally.

While there is no doubt we would all prefer to live in a world with no nuclear weapons, indulging in utopian dreams is not what our constituents sent us here to do—wishful thinking. We can't reduce or stifle our nuclear capabilities while allowing our adversaries to increase their arsenals and their capability. We must operate in the world we live in, not the one we wish for. America's adversaries possess this low-yield nuclear weapon capability. At least from their rhetoric and their doctrine, it seems like they are prepared to use it.

I fundamentally disagree with House Democrats' attempts to block the Pentagon from deploying low-yield nuclear warheads on submarine-launched ballistic missiles, which was the recommendation of that Nuclear Posture Review I mentioned earlier. They would place our country at a strategic disadvantage and reinforce our adversaries' belief that they can escalate to deescalate and make the world a far more dangerous place.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Connecticut.

GUN VIOLENCE

Mr. BLUMENTHAL. Mr. President, 6 years have passed since 20 beautiful children and 6 wonderful educators were killed in a massacre that gripped the Nation's attention in Newtown, CT. That tragedy, for any of us who lived through it, remains as real and vivid and grief-stricken today as it was then. We have lived with the memories and with the families and with countless others who found their lives changed—literally, transformed—in ways they never imagined.

In the day or so after that shooting—it may have been the following day—I was at one of the numerous calling hours I attended, and I spoke with one of the moms of those children. I said to her: When you are ready, we should talk about what can be done about gun violence in America.

She looked at me, through her tears, and she said: I am ready now.

Many of the families of Sandy Hook were ready then. Our Nation was ready then. Yet the U.S. Congress proved disastrously and tragically unready—in fact, failing in its responsibility to react not only with prayers and thoughts, as it did, but also with action to honor those wonderful children and educators with action, to honor them before others would die in the same way, the result of massacres that are preventable.

The Senate came close to acting. More than 50 votes were there for a background check bill, which had bipartisan support, but not the 60 votes that were necessary. From this Gallery vividly came the shout: Shame on you.

It was well justified.

Shame on the U.S. Senate for failing to act 6 years ago. Shame on the Congress for being complicit in the continuing massacres that have been added since Sandy Hook: Oak Creek, Blacksburg, Charleston, Chattanooga, Lafayette, Parkland, San Bernardino, Las Vegas, Sutherland Springs. That is just a partial list, not to mention the 90 deaths every day, often occurring singularly or in twos or threes or by suicide or by accident, as claimed the life of Ethan Song in Guilford, CT, when he was playing with a friend and a gun killed him—a loss that Kristin and Michael Song have made positive by their advocacy of commonsense measures to require safe storage of weapons.

The voices and faces of Sandy Hook have continued to inspire and move us. As of Parkland and all of the other tragedies that have occurred, they have rallied and written, emailed and called, organized and mobilized, and they have created a movement. It is a movement that is turning around this country, and it already has the effect of breaking the vice-like grip of the NRA on Congress. It is moving us forward. It has spawned groups at the grassroots, like Newtown Action Alliance and Everytown for Gun Safety, Moms Demand Action, CT Against Gun Violence, Brady, and many others, in-

cluding Sandy Hook Promise, whose dinner we will attend tonight, their annual gathering.

We have come to the floor of the Senate now to demand action that honors those victims and prevents more victims, more survivors, more grieving families. I am here with my colleague Senator CHRIS MURPHY, who has been an unstinting advocate, a champion, a partner in this effort. We are here to demand that this body act on a measure that was passed more than 100 days ago by the House, which would require a universal background check.

The fact that the House passed that measure is itself evidence of a change that is moving this country. The change in leadership in the House is the result of the election of new Members in the House of Representatives as a result of the gun violence prevention movement that politically is acquiring an undeniable and indisputable force. Gun violence prevention was on the ballot in the last election, and gun violence prevention won. It won in the new Members of Congress who have championed that universal background check measure and closing the Charleston loophole, and they have successfully passed it there. They are making a critical difference, and they are coming here. Their election is the result of that grassroots political movement that is changing the narrative, and for the first time, it puts us nearer—in fact, nearer than ever before, that I can remember—to commonsense measures that will stop gun violence.

I have been involved in this effort since my earliest days as attorney general in the early 1990s, when Connecticut passed a ban on assault weapons. I not only advocated for it but then defended it in court against many of the arguments that continue to be made today, even though they have been rejected by the courts and the American people.

States have moved forward, as Connecticut has done, to adopt these commonsense measures: universal background checks; a ban on assault weapons and high-capacity magazines; most recently, a safe storage bill, Ethan's Law in Connecticut; a ban on bump stocks and 3D weapons; and, of course, measures that keep guns out of the hands of dangerous people. But the laws of a State like Connecticut—those strong laws—are no stronger or more effective than the laws of the weakest States because guns come across our borders. We are at the mercy of States with little or no protection for their people. The solution is a national one. It must apply across the country to make our Nation safer and to keep guns out of the hands of dangerous people.

As near as we are and as much as has been accomplished, the work to be done is right here in this body, on this floor, and it must be done now. That is why we are here. That is why I have advocated for other measures. I have introduced Ethan's Law to provide for safe

storage. It has been supported here. A number of you have met with Kristin and Michael Song, and they will be visiting again. I have introduced an emergency risk protection order bill that would enable courts and law enforcement to take guns out of the hands of dangerous people as a result of a warrant and due process; an incentive program at the national level that makes States more aware and more inclined to adopt them, which should be bipartisan; a law that repeals PLCAA, the protection of lawful commerce in arms. This was adopted with the promise that no one would be deprived of a right of action, no one would be barred from the courthouse, but in fact PLCAA has prevented victims from seeking justice. It has stopped their day in court, and it should be repealed.

Those measures should be moved forward, and I am hopeful they will with bipartisan support. There is no question today about the need for a universal background check bill that Senator MURPHY and I and others who will speak today have advocated and now offers an opportunity for bicameral approval.

This movement has indisputable force. It has a dynamism and drive that will only increase regardless of what happens today. We are not giving up; we are not going away; and history will judge harshly a majority leader and a majority that fails to give us a vote. It will judge harshly opponents of these commonsense measures, and the voters will judge harshly because gun violence prevention will be on the ballot again. We will make sure of it. The American people will have an opportunity to vote again for candidates who support commonsense, sensible measures to make America safer, to keep guns out of the hands of truly dangerous people. The grip of the NRA is breaking. The gun lobby is crumbling from within and losing its traction in the field.

We are on the right side of history, and I hope my colleagues will see it that way, too, and will give us a vote. Let us vote on universal background checks, the bill that has come to us from the House of Representatives. Let's do it today.

Thank you.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Connecticut.

Mr. MURPHY. Mr. President, I am on the floor to join my colleagues Senator BLUMENTHAL and those who will speak afterward.

It has been 113 days since the House of Representatives passed H.R. 8, the bipartisan background checks bill. We have a proposal before the Senate as well, and we are here to make a simple request: Bring this bill up for a debate. Let us do our work as the U.S. Senate on an issue that dominates headlines, dominates kitchen table conversation, and steals from this country 36,000 lives a year, 3,000 a month, and 100 a day. Those are the number of people who are killed by gunshot wounds.